Ontario

ORDER NO. 88-084
MAY 1988
AGDEX 440/22

Factsheet

FARROWING MANAGEMENT OF THE SOW

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INTRODUCTION

A number of objectives must be met to maximize productivity in the farrowing area. These are:

1. Provide a comfortable environment for the sows and piglets.
2. Keep the number of stillborn pigs to a minimum.
3. Ensure a high survival rate for the piglets.
4. Achieve good weaning weights to improve post-weaning performance.
5. Minimize sow weight loss to ensure a speedy return to estrus and a high ovulation rate.

Better control of the temperature, improved pen design, flooring and management techniques have all led to increased productivity in this area.

ENTRY OF SOWS INTO THE FARROWING BARN

The crates should be cleaned, disinfected and dried before the sow enters. Sows, and gilts especially, should be moved in 7-10 days before farrowing in order to allow them to accommodate themselves to the new environment. If this is not done, there may be a risk of sow hysteria and savaging of the pigs at farrowing. Appropriate vaccinations should be completed before the sow enters the farrowing area. The pregnant animal should be thoroughly washed before entry to reduce the spread of disease-causing organisms from the gestation barn to the farrowing barn.

FARROWING

The average gestation length of the sow is 114-115 days, with a range of 111-119 days. Gestation length can be influenced by breed, litter size (shorter in larger litters), and the season.

Signs of impending parturition are vulvar and udder enlargement, reduction in appetite, restlessness, nest making if bedding is available and presence of milk in the teats. Shivering, followed by straining may occur.

The actual delivery time averages 2.5 hours. The past farrowing record of a sow is a good guide to the length expected.

Afterbirths (placenta) are usually expelled rapidly after all the piglets are born. After the piglets are born and the placenta passed, a thin white discharge is frequently seen for a few days.

ASSISTING THE SOW

Uterine inertia (tiring of the muscles of the uterus) can occur during an extended delivery. It is frequently seen when a piglet causes an obstruction to the passageway. Overdue, overfat and constipated sows may also be prone to uterine tiring.

It is wise to consider assisting the sow if more than 30 minutes have gone by between piglet births. The animal is best examined by an experienced operator. The operator needs clean, warm water, mild disinfectant, sterile lubricating jelly or soap and a clean towel. Small hands and forearms are of great benefit. The sow is best examined when she is lying down. The hand and arm should be washed and lubricated, then "coned" (all fingers and thumb touching) and passed slowly through the vulva into the vagina. The arm should be slowly advanced until the obstructing piglet is met. If the piglet is presented head first, the lower jaw should be grasped; if the piglet is coming hind end first, one or both legs should be grasped and slowly withdrawn. It is important to remove all piglets behind the obstructing piglet as they may be short of oxygen and otherwise risk being stillborn. The piglet's mouth and nostrils should be cleared of mucus as soon as it is born.

A veterinarian may be required in selected cases. Piglets may be felt in the horns but cannot be grasped, or a gilt may be so small that manual intervention is not possible. A caesarian section or emergency slaughter should then be the decision of the veterinarian.

CORRECT USAGE OF MEDICATIONS

After removing as many pigs as possible, an intramuscular dose of oxytocin should be given. Oxytocin should **never** be given to a sow unless she has been manually examined first in order to ensure that the birth canal is clear and there are no obstructing piglets present. Care must be taken not to overdose with oxytocin. Signs indicating toxicity are vomiting,

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straining and voiding of dung. If the muscles of the uterus are very tired or oxytocin has been used repeatedly, then the uterus may no longer respond.

After any assisted farrowing, the sow should be given an antibiotic. Off-color discharges may indicate a necessity to continue antibiotic therapy for a few days. Your herd veterinarian should be contacted for advice in these cases.

INDUCED FARROWING OF THE SOW

Producers may wish to induce farrowing in all or some of their sows by the use of prostaglandin for the following reasons:

1. Facilitation of all-in, all-out practices (group farrowing).
2. To ensure that barn personnel will be on hand to assist farrowing.
3. Reduction of stillbirth rate and preweaning mortality.
4. Start farrowing in overdue sows.
5. Facilitate cross-fostering.

Accurate breeding records **must** be maintained so the average herd gestation length can be calculated before using prostaglandin. If prostaglandin is being administered to an individual sow, then the individual farrowing date must be calculated. The prostaglandin is then given 24 hours before the expected due date. For example, if the average gestation length of the sow/herd is 115 days, then the prostaglandin is administered on day 114. If prostaglandin is given too early (3-4 days before the expected due date), the piglets will be born small and weak and a greater piglet mortality will generally be experienced.

Most sows will farrow within 24-36 hours after prostaglandin administration. One can reasonably expect 80% of the injected sows to farrow on a predicted date. By 48 hours after prostaglandin administration, all sows will have finished farrowing.

Alternatively, prostaglandins can be utilized to farrow the "tail-enders" of an all-in, all-out system. These sows are overdue by 2-3 days from the rest of the group that have farrowed.

Cross-fostering will also be made easier with group farrowing, since all piglets will be born at approximately the same time.

Side effects may occasionally be seen with prostaglandin administration. The sow may become restless and paw at the ground or rub her snout. Sows may salivate, urinate and defecate. Prostaglandin should never be handled by pregnant women since the drug can be absorbed through the skin if spilled and may cause an abortion.

There is no subsequent negative effect on the sow's reproductive performance with prostaglandin usage. There can be a benefit of a 5-10 day decrease per year in the farrowing interval.

FEEDING THE LACTATING SOW

Performance during lactation is influenced by nutrition during pregnancy. A thin sow at farrowing will have inadequate reserves for the heavy demands imposed by lactation and will then be in poor condition at weaning. These sows have a poorer rebreeding performance at weaning and the next litter size may be reduced.

Sows should be full fed once farrowing is completed, to maximize milk production. Sows that have been limit fed at the beginning of lactation have been found to produce less milk (10-15% decrease) than full fed sows, will consume less feed during lactation, and sow weight loss will be increased. Average feed intake per lactation should be about 4-5 kg./day for gilts and 5.5 kg./day for sows of a 16% protein diet. If feed intake is a problem, it is advised to maintain the room temperature at 20° C, feed three times daily and increase the protein and energy content of the diet. Feeders should be cleaned at every feeding. The flow rate of drinkers should be checked in every farrowing room to ensure a rate of 1 litre/minute. Poor water flow leads to decreased intake by the sow, poorer feed consumption, constipation and poor milking.

CONCLUSION

Proper management and care of the farrowing and nursing sow will assist in maximizing sow and litter performance. Good sanitation practices, proper nutrition and a comfortable environment for both sow and piglets require only a modest amount of input for a maximum amount of profit.

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ISSN 0225-7882